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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to determine which types of verbal humor are preferred by children and to discover how well adults can predict what children will perceive as humorous. Fifteen adults (education students, parents, and teachers) were asked to rate 25 jokes on a four point scale ranging from not funny at all and not very funny to kind of funny and very funny. The 30 fifth grade students who participated in the study were volunteers from two elementary schools in Racine County, Wisconsin. The jokes, which were selected from five popular children's joke books, represented four types of humor--incongruity, novelty, tendentious, and pun or word play. A fifth category, non-humorous, was also included. The fifth graders were directed to rate each joke on its own merits. At the same time, the adult control group was asked to rate the jokes the way they thought a fifth grader would rate them. Findings indicated that fifth graders and adults are more alike than different in their appreciation of humor, that appreciation of verbal humor is highly individual, and that adults tend to feel that fifth graders will find things funnier than they actually do. The implication for curriculum developers who wish to use humor in instruction is that they should pretest materials with a target audience. (DB)

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APPRECIATION OF HUMOR:

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

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APPRECIATION OF HUMOR: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Wise designers of and writers for instructional media generally conduct intensive analyses of their intended audiences. They examine the audience, or learners, in terms of intelligence, interests, abilities, knowledge of a subject or task, and attitudes toward that subject or task. With such knowledge, designers determine the complexity of ideas to be presented, the vocabulary level for text or narration, the kind of involvement and degree of participation needed by the learner, the number and kind of examples to use, and so forth. For every age level, these decisions can be based on empirical data.

Humor is an often-used element in instructional material. Yet we know little about the production of humor, responses to humor, or individual differences in humor appreciation. Even less is known about the role that humor plays in learning.

In the period from 1950-1971, only 100 studies related to humor were conducted, only 37 of which were experimental in design (having one or more manipulated variable) (Goldstein and McGhee, 1972). Anderson (1972) laments, "When you consider the central role which humor is supposed to play in human interaction and in the daily lives of individuals, 50 or 100 items is a suprising modest amount of research." Of the 100 studies, only 12 used children as subjects (Goldstein and McGhee, 1972). The data obtained in many studies are difficult to interpret due to lack of experimental control (McGhee, 1971b).

There has been a number of attempts to classify humor (Cattell and Luborsky, 1947; Eysenck, 1942). One approach to classification is to look at the properties of the medium used to encode: visual--humor represented

in picture or drawing only, e.g. a cartoon; verbal humor--humor represented in words, e.g. a joke or riddle; or visual/verbal--some combination of the two elements, e.g. a cartoon with a verbal tag.

Another classification system might involve kinds of humor as distinguished by its stimulus properties (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). Four common categories or types of verbal humor appearing in children's jokes are incongruity, novelty or nonsense, puns and other word play, and tendentious humor.

In an incongruous situation, there is a conflict between what is expected and what occurs (Pien and Rothbart, 1976). These expectancy violations occur at the abstract conceptual level. No stimulus elements are physically discrepant from experience (McGhee, 1971a). In novelty or nonsense humor, on the other hand, a physical discrepency exists (McGhee, 1971a). The situation is physically impossible. In puns and other word play, the humor is based on the sounds or meanings of the words themselves. Tendentious humor depicts events that would normally be gruesome, terrifying, or shocking in the extreme (Berlyne, 1972). Elements of sex, aggression, violence, or ridicule may be found.

There has been little research to determine why pre-adolescents and adolescents laugh or to analyze what they find humorous. One study was conducted with 700+ young people in Scotland (Laing, 1939). Three different age groups (7-10, 11-13, and 14-18 years of age) were studied. It was found that the two younger groups preferred visual humor to verbal humor; in fact, they showed little appreciation for verbal wit. The middle group found incidents involving someone's discomfiture most amusing.

Since humor appears frequently in instructional materials for young

people, it seems we need to know a great deal more about the effects of humor on comprehension, on attitude, on attention, and on response. Prior to this, however, it seems essential to determine what is perceived as humorous, whether particular types of humor are considered more humorous than others, and whether this preference for humor varies with age, intelligence, education, or any other factors.

The purposes of this study were to determine what kinds of verbal humor fifth graders prefer, how their preferences compare to those of adults, and since adults frequently write humorous materials for young people and use humor as an element in designing instructional materials for young people, how well they can predict what fifth graders perceive as humorous.

Research questions were:

1. What kinds of verbal humor do fifth graders perceive to be the funniest?
2. How well can adults judge what fifth graders perceive to be humorous?

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

Fifth graders who participated in this study were 30 volunteers from three classrooms in two schools in Racine County, Wisconsin. There were 14 males and 16 females with a mean age of 10 years 5 months.

Adults in one group were 15 volunteers from graduate and senior classes in Instructional Systems Technology at Indiana University.

Adults in the second group were 15 volunteers who were teaching

or had taught fifth grade, or they were the parents of fifth graders.

Stimulus Materials

Sixty-three jokes were selected at random from five popular children's joke books. The jokes were given to 10 adults to read and to judge the type of humor represented: incongruity (I), novelty (N), tendentious (T), pun or word play (P), or whether the material was non-humorous (X). Five examples of each of the four types of humor and five non-humorous examples were randomly selected from those items which were coded identically by eight of the ten judges.

Measures of Appreciation

As measures of appreciation of humor, both overt expressions of affect (smiling or laughing) or some type of verbal rating have been used, each with its own methodological problems (Goldstein and McGhee, 1972). The verbal rating scale has been used most frequently in humor appreciation research.

A four point scale was used because children may find differentiation at the ends of the scale a relatively simple task, but they may have difficulty making finer differentiation for the points in-between. The four-point scale allows them no neutral point; a decision must be made. The four points used were: (1) not funny at all, (2) not very funny, (3) kind of funny, (4) very funny.

McGhee (1971b) reports that using children's verbal ratings of funniness encounters the problems of evoking socially desirable responses, but that this can be reduced somewhat if a "not funny at all" rating is included. Children may be less likely to give it a high rating just because

they think the experimenter wants them to rate it highly.

Two additional procedures were used in an attempt to obtain honest ratings. First, five non-humorous items were included so that the raters would feel comfortable making a decision that an item was not funny. (A non-humorous item contained no element of sit but was written in the form of a joke--e.g., Teacher: What is 4 and 42? Betty: 46). In addition, subjects were assured that the jokes were not written by the experimenter.

Procedure

The twenty-five examples were typed on cards. The cards were then randomly arranged. Each subject was given the 25 items and four envelopes which were marked "1=not funny at all," "2=not very funny," "3=kind of funny," and "4=very funny."

Fifth graders and the first group of adults were asked to read each joke and put it into the envelope that best described how they felt about how funny it was. They were instructed not to compare the jokes, but to rate each one on its own merits. They were told that the experimenter did not write the jokes, so they could give their opinions freely.

Adults in the second group (parents and teachers) were given the same 25 randomly arranged examples, but they were asked to sort the cards the way they thought a fifth grader would--i.e., they were asked to judge how funny a fifth grader would find each example. This group was also told not to compare the jokes, and that the experimenter did not write the jokes.

Scores were attained by totalling the ratings for all five examples for each type of humor. Scores could range from 5 ("not funny at all" = 1 x 5) to 20 ("very funny" = 4 x 5).

RESULTS

For purposes of analyses, the fifth graders' scores were randomly assigned to two groups (N=15 in each group). The mean score and standard deviation for each type of humor for both age groups was determined and is shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Analysis of variance was used to test the significance of differences between the means (Winer, 1972). A 4 x 2 factorial model with repeated measures on one factor was used. (The means for non-humorous examples were not included in the ANOVA).

The first analysis compared the mean ratings of fifth graders to the mean ratings of adults. As shown in Table 2, there were no significant differences found for the variable of age or for the variable of type of humor, nor was there an interaction effect. A t-test revealed that adults were able to recognize non-humorous items significantly better than fifth graders, $t(28)=2.57$, $p<.05$.

Insert Table 2 about here

The second analysis compared the mean ratings of fifth graders with mean ratings that adults predicted fifth graders would give. There was a significant difference (Table 3) between their ratings, $F(1,28)=5.64$, p .05. In addition, a significant difference was found for the different types of humor, $F(3,84)=2.95$, $p<.05$, but there was no interaction effect. Further analysis using the Newman-Keuls procedure revealed that novelty humor is preferred to puns and word play, $(3,84)=1.64$, $p<.05$.

Insert Table 3 about here

DISCUSSION

From the results of this study, it would appear that fifth graders and adults are more alike than different in their appreciation of verbal humor. It also appears that adults tend to feel fifth graders will find things funnier than they actually do, yet none of the adults who were asked to judge the examples as they felt a fifth grader would appeared to be uneasy with the task.

Judging from the standard deviations, it would appear that the appreciation of verbal humor is a highly individual thing. Designers and writers of educational materials, however, must generally write for large audiences. When designing for this age group, those who have long recognized the need to pretest materials with a target audience in terms of content, vocabulary, comprehension, and so forth, might be wise to obtain a measure of humor appreciation if they are going to use humor in instruction.

Further research is needed to find out more about the role of humor in instruction and individual differences in humor appreciation.

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TABLE 1

MEAN SCORES (AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS)

Type of Humor	Fifth Graders	Adults
Incongruity	12.87 (6.52)	13.53 (11.79)
Novelty	13.60 (14.77)	14.47 (9.58)
Puns	13.67 (8.08)	12.20 (8.42)
Tendentious	13.07 (11.12)	13.00 (8.13)
(Non-humorous)	6.40 (4.9)	5.47 (.78)

Type of Humor	Fifth Graders	Adults for Fifth Graders
Incongruity	13.67 (14.88)	15.47 (6.38)
Novelty	13.47 (9.45)	16.87 (4.25)
Puns	13.27 (13.52)	13.8 (4.56)
Tendentious	13.54 (11.58)	16.07 (5.66)
(Non-humorous)	5.8 (1.32)	5.8 (2.03)

Table 2

SUMMARY ANOVA TABLE

Fifth Graders' Ratings/Adults' Ratings

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	Sign.
Between Subjects	605				
Age	0	1	0		
Within Groups	605	28	21.6	0	n.s.
Within Subjects	620				
Type	22	3	7.34	1.079	n.s.
Age x Type	24	3	8.0	1.176	n.s.
Type x Swg	574	84	6.8		

Table 3

SUMMARY ANOVA TABLE

Fifth Graders' Ratings/Adults' Predictions of Fifth Graders' Ratings

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	Sign.
Between Subjects	763.5				
Age	128	1	128		
Within groups	635.5	28	22.7	5.64	$p<.05$
Within Subjects	496.5				
Type	44.2	3	14.74	2.95	$p<.05$
Age x Type	32.8	3	10.93	2.19	n.s.
Type x Swg	4.9.5	84	4.99		